

**Testimony of Denise Holland
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**Before the House Budget Committee
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2:00 PM**

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Chairman Spratt, and members of the Committee, I want to thank you for the opportunity to be here and testify before you today. My name is Denise Holland, and I'm the Executive Director of the Harvest Hope Food Bank in Columbia, South Carolina. I'm here representing the Harvest Hope Food Bank, which serves 18 counties in central South Carolina, as well as America's Second Harvest – The Nation's Food Bank Network.

America's Second Harvest – The Nation's Food Bank Network is the largest hunger relief organization in the United States. Second Harvest member food banks serve all 50 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico. Nearly every community in the United States is served by an America's Second Harvest food bank and its local network of food pantries, congregant feeding programs, after school programs, and programs that serve the elderly. This work is accomplished through programs operated by congregations of every religious persuasion, civic organizations, and social welfare agencies. More than 50,000 local programs are included in this system of private sector support for the poor and needy in our communities.

Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, I have been a food bank director for nine years working to feed and serve hungry and needy people in my state. Since coming to Harvest Hope Food Bank, I have seen a dramatic increase in the problem of hunger and the complexities of hunger and poverty in Columbia, in the rural communities outside of Columbia, and around the country. And as the problem has grown worse, the profiles of the people affected by the threat of hunger have changed. Long gone are the days when the chronically unemployed and homeless men represented the majority of the people we serve. Today many of the people receiving food assistance from our partner programs are working; they are most likely not receiving welfare, and are often faced with the challenges of finding affordable housing and adequate health care. Today, we see too many kids in soup kitchen lines, too many working parents at congregational food pantries, and too many elderly people having to choose between paying utility bills and eating.

Three months ago, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) released its annual prevalence estimates of food insecurity. The USDA estimates are an objective and authoritative measure of the state of food insecurity in our nation. In releasing these new food insecurity estimates, the Department chose to abandon using the term “hunger” and replaced it instead with “very low food insecurity.” Changing words to describe hunger does not change the prevalence of hunger in America and in my state of South Carolina. Despite the word change, these prevalence estimates are generated by a highly reputable agency of the Federal government – USDA’s Economic Research Service – and these statistics are viewed as the final and authoritative word on the problem of hunger in America.

The most recent USDA prevalence estimates find that more than one-in-ten American households – including 35 million people in all – live in food insecure households. Of the 35 million people deemed food insecure – in South Carolina, like the rest of the country, we just call them hungry – more than 12 million are children. In South Carolina we are 48th of 50 states and the District. We have the fourth worst rate of food insecurity in the nation – and the highest rate of households with “very low food insecurity,” or hunger, with 15.5%.

In addition to the USDA estimates of food insecurity, America’s Second Harvest also conducts independent research on the prevalence of the hunger problem and measures how well food banks are doing as they work to address this problem. According to independent research by Mathematica Policy, Inc. for America’s Second Harvest, an estimated 25 million unduplicated people nationwide – including nine million children and nearly three million seniors – received emergency food assistance from our network food banks in 2005. That represents an 8% increase over 2001 and an 18% increase from a decade ago.

On any given week – this week, for example – four and a half million people are lined up for emergency food boxes at pantries or for hot meals at community kitchens across the nation. More than a third of the people served by our food programs – 36%– are employed, and of our emergency food recipients, 70% reside in households were deemed food insecure using the USDA standards.

But national statistics can often be too abstract. So let me discuss the problem of hunger in South Carolina – and my community in and around Columbia, my home. The Harvest Hope Food Bank serves 18 counties in central South Carolina. It not only serves the capitol city of Columbia and its suburbs, but it also serves small towns, and rural areas. Last year, the Harvest Hope Food Bank served more than 149,000 different needy people in a region of over 1.2 million people. Of the 200,000 people estimated by the Census to live in poverty in our community – nearly three-fourths had, at some time, turned to our partner agencies for food and services. This is incredible and shameful in a nation so blessed by a strong economy and agricultural abundance.

On any given week in central South Carolina – including the 5th Congressional District – some 19,100 different people receive food assistance from the Harvest Hope Food Bank

through local, volunteer led, and community-based agencies. These numbers matter because they allow you to see the challenge we face in South Carolina and in food banks and hunger relief organizations all across the country. Food banks and their agencies are the last defense against hunger for many low-income and working families. It is a good thing that this network of food banks and community based agencies exists, because more and more we are seeing people who must give up buying food at the grocery store so they can pay the rent, the utility bill, address a health emergency, or just put shoes on their children's feet. These are people who are falling through the cracks in our nation's safety net.

Approximately six months ago, I was behind a family in the grocery store. While I waited in line I watched a mother with three children face the dilemma of choosing to put back some groceries because her food stamp benefit was not enough to obtain what she had in her buggy. She had chosen very nutritious foods but was short \$17 dollars and was returning good food items such as peanut butter, jelly, bread, cheese, cereal and frozen chicken. One of her daughters, I'm guessing that she was about 9 or 10 years old, appeared very sad. I heard the mother say, "I know, honey, these are some of your favorites but I just don't have enough left at the end of the month to pay for these so we have to put things back-I am so sorry." The little girl looked down and I thought she was going to cry. I quietly told the mother that I completely understood her situation and could I pay for these items for her and handed her my business card. She broke down in tears and hugged me around the neck very thankful that I could do this for her because, with approximately 9 more days left in the month, she was not going to make it until her next food stamp allotment came in. I share this with you because this is definitely the reality for working families. The food stamp benefit is extremely helpful but, according to the America's Second Harvest Hunger study, it only lasts 2.3 weeks a month. This is a devastating reality for a family to face. It is especially devastating for children to have to worry about what they are going to eat. Food stamps are a lifeline for working families and any reductions in this program will affect tens of thousands of families and significantly impact our donated food system. At Harvest Hope Food bank, our pantries, and especially our own onsite pantry, experience a dramatic increase in the need for food toward the end of every month because the current allocation, while extremely helpful, needs to be increased. It certainly does not need to be decreased. I worry about how the President's budget proposal will affect working poor families.

At one of our Kids Cafe sites last year, I stopped to visit a table where elementary school children were eating. That night they were having chicken, collard greens, rice and peaches. All great southern food! I looked at one little boy who seemed to be greatly enjoying his meal and I asked him, before he came to our Kids Cafe site, what he did for dinner. He reached in his pants pocket and pulled out a quarter and said, "Before coming here, I would stop by a gas station and buy me a pack of crackers with peanut butter in them, because my momma works two jobs so she is not at home at night to fix something hot." This has fueled my passion to make sure that I must work hard with every available resource at my disposal to make sure that no child only has crackers to eat at night. How can we possibly expect our children to succeed in school when they are hungry?

To meet these needs in our communities, the food bank system was created to secure private donations of food and surplus government commodities, warehouse those donations and then distribute them to local partner agencies. This system allows us to receive donated food and produce from all around the country and provide it to needy people in my community. Food banks are the lynchpin in a massive network of private, charitable hunger relief that operates in nearly every community throughout the nation.

The local agency system in South Carolina and around the country is largely comprised of faith-based entities, with three-fourths of the pantries in our system being part of the community support provided by churches, synagogues, temples and mosques. These local hunger relief agencies reflect the very best of America, the broad array of America's social fabric and religious life; they also highlight the public and private sector successfully working together to address a major public health and social issue. I would like to commend the South Carolina Department of Social Services for their support in our hunger relief efforts. They are a highly valued partner in the fight to eliminate hunger and actively participate with us.

Our agencies rely heavily on volunteers to provide hunger relief, with two-thirds of our partner programs relying entirely on volunteer support. The volunteers in our system are crucial to our work. An estimated one million different people comprise the volunteer work-force around the country. These volunteers provide an average of 53 hours of labor annually, or put another way, they donate a full-time work week plus overtime each year to help their needy neighbors. Using the current minimum wage, the value of volunteer labor in our network in a typical week is estimated at \$8.2 million, or nearly a half a billion dollars per year.

The volunteers that keep our system moving don't just ladle soup or pack food boxes. They provide additional support to needy families that come to the pantries for assistance. Often the lack of food is just the presenting problem and the beginning of a relationship toward self sufficiency. Partner agencies provide after school tutoring in Kids Café programs, community support to seniors, counseling and training for jobs, housing support, mental health services, and an array of other support services that transform lives. Using a commodity that we have an abundance of – food - we are able to engage, educate, and empower people toward self sufficiency. This is the transformation that food programs provide everyday.

Our charitable food system has evolved and become more sophisticated as the face of hunger has changed. The need for much better food stamp referrals is based on the reality that little more than one-third (38%) of the people we serve are enrolled in the Food Stamp Program, even though nearly two-thirds (64%) reside in households with incomes below the Federal poverty level. We provide utility assistance and referrals to other public programs because the research shows that 53% of those we serve had to choose between buying food or paying their utility bills, 35% had to choose between buying food and paying their rent or mortgage, and 41% had to choose between buying food and paying for medicine or medical care.

Mr. Chairman, these facts are unacceptable in a nation as wealthy as ours. In America today we allow nine million children a year to rely on private charity to ensure that they don't go to bed hungry. We must do better. This Committee has an opportunity in the budget process to help reduce hunger and support the very effective efforts of the emergency food providers to meet the hunger needs in their communities.

I am particularly concerned with President's Fiscal Year 2008 Budget proposal. The President's budget request funds – or in too many instances cuts – a number of programs that are utilized by many of the low-income people we serve in South Carolina. These are families that do not want a hand out, but a hand up. They want to work toward self sufficiency, but the system that should support that goal is too often is stacked against them.

Let me provide one example of what I mean. The President's budget request proposes eliminating categorical eligibility in Food Stamps for families that are on TANF but receiving non-cash assistance. The non-cash assistance takes several forms, such as government supported child-care or day care, transportation, and other work supports. The categorical eligibility is meant to allow these families – typically, single working moms with children – to continue to receive TANF and food stamp benefits while they transition from welfare assistance to work and eventually self-sufficiency. Yet, the President's proposal would deny them food stamp benefits if their meager income or assets rise above the typical food stamp income threshold – which for a typical low-income household of three, a single working mother with two children is approximately \$1,799.00 gross income per month.

In South Carolina there are 227,000 households participating in the Food Stamp Program. The President's budget proposal will negatively affect an estimated 68,000 South Carolina households. It will not only increase the number of families who will have to go without food but it will also increase the number of people who will have to rely on donated supplies. At Harvest Hope Food Bank we never turn down any resource and we actively work to recruit more food resources. It is important to keep in mind that these numbers represent real people. And the challenges I face, on a day to day basis, to provide food for those in need are constantly growing. Removing any resource for being able to provide food would be devastating.

Mr. Chairman, increasing access to the Food Stamp Program should be a goal of this Administration and of the Congress. With the participation rate of eligible individuals in the Food Stamp Program is at only about 60% nationwide – and only a little better in South Carolina, where the rate is about 65%. More can, and should be done to ensure that low-income families who need supplemental food assistance to feed their children get the help they need. Needy seniors, legal immigrants and the working poor are all underrepresented in the Food Stamp Program and the President's proposal does little to address this problem.

Food stamps are the cornerstone in the nation's efforts to reduce hunger and help low-income families achieve self-sufficiency. Harvest Hope Food Bank and all of the

nation's food banks are committed to continue working to improve and strengthen the Food Stamp Program. For instance, food banks across the United States participate in food stamp outreach activities with private funding and with the support of USDA. And it is in these public private partnerships that we leverage our resources, build strong networks, and best serve those in need.

Mr. Chairman, the nation's food banks are like the proverbial "canary in the mine shaft." We see the effects of poor economies, lay-offs, and rising energy, health, and housing costs, often before they show up in government statistics. Of course, we must always remember that these statistics represent more than mere numbers: they represent real people in our own neighborhoods and communities who are struggling to make ends meet. We see the family that struggles to pay the rent and therefore cuts into the family food budget. Nationally, 35 % of emergency food recipients have to choose between buying food and paying the rent or mortgage. Another 42% have to choose between buying food and paying their utility bills.

These families have to make difficult decisions and face heart wrenching trade-offs. When the President proposes cutting Low-Income Heating and Energy Assistance (LIHEAP) as he has in this budget request, it exacerbates the problems for those families that are already struggling to figure out how they will pay their utility bills. Or if the President proposes cutting Section 8 housing vouchers, as he suggested in this budget, it again only forces many of these families to choose between paying rent and putting food on the table. In Columbia South Carolina, the problem is very real and the estimated 4,500 people who live in public housing or receive Section 8 housing vouchers would rather pay rent and go hungry than be homeless. Just this past weekend our food bank was broken into and all we could find missing was several packages of meat. Food is a grave concern.

The President's budget request makes a number of reductions in funding for programs that, if allowed, will increase the number of people that turn to food banks for food assistance – while simultaneously cutting support for the very private sector charitable agencies that are meant to serve these families. One program targeted for elimination in the President's budget is the Commodity Supplemental Food Program (CSFP).

CSFP provides specialized monthly supplemental food packages of USDA commodities for low-income seniors and low-income, nutritionally at risk pregnant women, post-partum women, infants and children up to age six. The CSFP food packages are not meant to provide a full diet, but rather provide critical supplements to at-risk populations, especially seniors. In my food bank, we provided more than half a million pounds of CSFP commodities to 1,250, low-income seniors last year each month for a total of 15,000 distributions. And yet the President's budget proposes to eliminate the CSFP on the hope that the almost 442,000 seniors – 91% of the program's caseload – who are now participating in CSFP will instead enroll in the Food Stamp Program. Yet, the Department knows that the CSFP senior population – and indeed seniors all across America – participate in the Food Stamp Program at very low rates. They have difficulty in negotiating through the application process and even greater difficulty in utilizing the

benefits when they get them. But through CSFP, we are able to provide not just the food package, but also community-based support, which allows us to be able to check in on these senior citizens; see how they're doing and learn what other services beyond food assistance they may need. CSFP is a truly remarkable program that could help many more needy senior citizens, but the President's budget has targeted this program, once again, for elimination.

The elderly population in South Carolina is one of the fastest growing populations in the state. Three food banks in South Carolina participate in the CSFP program. These food banks utilize 47 sites in 6 counties; they provide a total of 3,705 seniors with a monthly nutritious box of food. Because the need is so great, especially in rural areas where there is a high concentration of elderly, we have had to establish a waiting list. When these seniors come to our food pantry they are often in wheelchairs, or rely on walkers. They are always thrilled to have the food.

Which brings, Mr. Chairman, to what I believe is a missed opportunity in the President's budget. Today, you have heard from the Secretary of Agriculture Mike Johanns about the upcoming Farm Bill reauthorization. The Farm Bill provides an opportunity to address the problem of hunger and under-nutrition in our communities in a profound way. Unfortunately, the President's budget and the administration's Farm Bill proposal fall far short of reducing hunger in South Carolina or the rest of our country. The President's budget proposal makes no new investments in The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP), a program that provides USDA commodities to food banks and other local charities for distribution to needy people through church food pantries, soup kitchens and shelters.

During the past four years, we have had a 39% increase in the need for food due to hunger and insecurity. We have also seen, during that time, a trend where public-sector food donations have not adequately kept up with the requests for food assistance that we face in our communities. Although most of the food we provide to needy families is sourced from the private sector, we rely heavily on Federal commodity programs, especially TEFAP, to stabilize and leverage those private donations.

Since the enactment of the last Farm Bill, there has been a troubling decrease in commodity donations through TEFAP. Since 2003, steadily rising farm commodity prices have reduced the need for USDA to purchase surplus commodities for market support purposes under the Department's Section 32 authority. Although the TEFAP mandatory purchases set by Congress have remained stable, the surplus or bonus commodities – constituting more than half of all TEFAP donations to food banks – have fallen off. Since 2001 bonus commodities have fallen by more than 60%. At the same time requests for food assistance have increased by 8% or more. Moreover, inventories held to support CSFP and support its costs have virtually disappeared, leaving this program under funded when appropriations are not sufficient to offset this shortfall.

I understand that in the upcoming debate on the Budget and on the Farm Bill, the choices may be few and the competing interests many, but with respect to TEFAP and the other

commodity donation programs we clearly find mutual and compound interest. Many of the commodities donated to TEFAP, CSFP and other commodity donation programs are acquired to support farm prices and provide a farm safety net. These programs also serve as a nutrition safety net for millions of hungry people. Moreover, TEFAP commodities offer some of the healthiest and most nutritious food distributed to our agencies. TEFAP commodities stabilize our distribution when private donations are lagging or can help extend private donations enabling the food mix to be more complete.

TEFAP is critical to the estimated 25 million low-income people that access these commodities through food banks and the agencies we serve. The Fiscal Year 2008 Budget Resolution and the next Farm Bill offer the opportunity to strengthen this system of farm-to-table for our nation's poor and hungry. As this Committee deliberates on the Fiscal Year 2008 Budget Resolution and how much will be provided for the Farm Bill, it is crucial that Congress: increase mandatory food purchases for TEFAP; stabilize the surplus commodities provided to the program through Section 32; and find a way to maintain CSFP caseloads when commodity inventories disappear, and seek a long term solution to the lack of programs in many areas with unserved needy seniors. With demographic trends moving as they are, the nation needs a strong senior nutrition safety net.

The compelling need to strengthen and enhance the Food Stamp Program so that it can reach more eligible Americans, and the substantial decline in government commodity stocks donated to the TEFAP and CSFP in the face of increased demand upon the charitable food system argue strongly against the President's dangerous plan to eliminate CSFP and weaken the Food Stamp Program. I respectfully ask this Committee to reject these administration proposals, and provide adequate funding for the nutrition title of the next Farm Bill so that all of our nation's hungry will have a place at the table.

Efforts to increase access to food stamps for so many of those who are eligible but not participating is one of the fastest ways to succeed in our nation's battle against hunger. With the next Farm Bill, we can also find creative ways to capitalize on the many potential sources of support for TEFAP and CSFP – government commodities, industry food donations, private charitable donations, infrastructure and administrative grants, increased volunteers, etc. – so that these programs can operate with dependable and sufficient resources to meet their ever growing need. We must find a way to ensure that our needy families and children, and the elderly find a place in the Budget and at our Farm Bill table.

Several years ago, three boys were visiting our food pantry with their mother who had cancer. The boys were taken to our packing area to give their mother a little private time with our volunteer counselor. While they were there, they did not realize they were helping our volunteers pack the bags of food that they were going to take home. The food was a combination of our donated supplies and TEFAP commodities. When they finished and were wheeling their cart to the Church van that brought them to us, one little boy looked at his older brother and said, "This is for us... Wow! We have never had this much food at our house, it is kinda like Christmas." The older brother, with a great deal of

compassion and maturity, put his hand on his little brothers shoulder and said, "Well, we have a lot to be thankful for, because this is what good people do to help people like us." In conclusion, Chairman Spratt and members of the Committee, I appreciate your allowing me to tell my story, and the story of many who are daily engaged in trying to end hunger in our country, one community at a time. Our hope is that the Budget Resolution will provide adequate discretionary funding for nutrition assistance programs in Fiscal Year 2008 and will also provide some new funding for the nutrition title of the next Farm Bill. Your committee's continued support and leadership can help pave the way to ending hunger in America.

Mr. Chairman, there are lots of good people in this country just like ourselves who need our help with these programs. My prayer is that help will continue. Thank you.

I look forward to answering any questions you may have.

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